

Return to Me by AdelaideElaine

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Character with PTSD, Coming of Age, F/M, Female Friendship, First Love, Mild Language, sisterly relationship, womanhood

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Holly Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-08-13

Updated: 2016-09-09

Packaged: 2022-04-01 00:42:10

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 7

Words: 16,686

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Eleven reappears as suddenly as she left, and although she wants to stay with Joyce Byers, it's decided that it would be best for all involved if she lives at the Wheeler house. Karen tries to teach her to cook, Mike tries to teach her to dance, and Nancy is charged with the task of trying to teach her how to be a Normal Girl-- even if having Jonathan Byers back in her life means that she has less understanding of what that means than ever.

Or, sometimes when the strange is ordinary, the ordinary can feel very strange.

1. The Return

Author's Note:

I was absolutely swept away by "Stranger Things," which appealed immensely to my profound secondhand nostalgia for the 1980s (I was born in 1992.) More than anything, I was really impressed by the young actors on the show and the rich inner lives they crafted for their characters. They completely captured my imagination, and this story was born. Although the show focuses on the boys, I've shifted the focus here to Eleven and Nancy, and their journey from girlhood to womanhood. I know these words have a lot of different meanings for a lot of different people, and this story simply reflects my own coming-of-age experiences and my ideas about what kind of challenges a girl like El would face in trying to acclimate to "normal" life. The rating may change later for sexual reasons, but there will be no violence or major character deaths. Please enjoy!

"I want to stay with Joyce."

It's one of the first full phrases they can coax out of Eleven when she turns up in the woods outside Hawkins, nearly a year after Will Byers first went missing.

Eleven is huddled on the couch in the Wheeler's living room, shivering. Karen snatches a knitted afghan from the back of Ted's recliner and drapes it over her narrow shoulders. She's still wearing Nancy's old pink dress and Mike's blue jacket and athletic socks, but the hand-me-downs are more ragged and filthy than ever. She's grown—perhaps not as much as she would have if she'd had three square meals a day—since the last time they saw her. Her delicate wrists poke out from under the frayed cuffs of the jacket, her hem falls well above her knobby knees, and there's a faint outline of budding curves under the smocked chest of her dress.

Mike sits in the corner, farther away from Eleven than any of the

other boys, sheet-white under his freckles. Nancy notices the way his dark eyes never leave Eleven's face, even though the girl seems to be doggedly avoiding any eye contact with him. Nancy feels an unexpected twist of sadness in her stomach—a second's grief for the loss of her “baby” brother, who had gone and become a little man while her back was turned.

Karen must notice Mike's stare too; she grabs a faded quilt from the arm of the couch and hastily tucks it over Eleven's bare legs. “Nancy,” she commands in the tone of a suggestion, “Why don't you run upstairs and fetch a bathrobe and some clean clothes for El-Eleven?” Karen trips over the unfamiliar number-turned-name, her smile chipper but brittle.

“Need any help?” Jonathan asks softly, his hand on Nancy's elbow as she turns to dash up the stairs.

“No thanks, I've got it,” she says with a shy smile, darting from the room.

Jonathan wraps a protective arm around Will. When Chief Hopper had first pulled up to the Wheeler house with Eleven in the back of his car, Dustin and Lucas had practically jumped up on her like eager puppies, both talking over each other at an increasingly loud volume as they peppered her with every question they could think of. Hopper had pulled the boys off her by the scruffs of their necks, reminding them gently but firmly that she'd been through a lot. However, Will had taken after Mike, and mostly hung back, unspeaking and unsmiling. Surely this was in part because he hadn't known Eleven like the other boys had, but Jonathan suspected there was more to it than that. Jonathan knew his brother's feelings about his time in the Upside Down must be complicated, because they rarely talked about it. They talked about everything else—music, books, school, their stressed-out mom, their useless dad, growing up poor among middle-class friends, life in the bubble of an Indiana small town. Jonathan had even admitted to Will that he thought Nancy Wheeler was “surprisingly cool” and “pretty cute;” if Will knew that was code for “I am hopelessly in love with her,” he didn't make a big thing of it.

Joyce had been through a mother's worst nightmare and somehow come out on the other side with a few scraps of her sanity intact, so

she was more than content to focus on rebuilding their home—both literally and figuratively—and let Will remain silent on the subject of the Upside-Down. Jonathan would like to know more about his brother's experience someday, but for the time being he would have to content himself with monitoring Will's still-delicate health and being an extra-attentive big brother. He never let Will bike home alone from the Wheelers' anymore, always driving over to pick him up after D&D.

It made Jonathan feel good to protect his brother and keep him safe. And if he happened to run into Nancy Wheeler in the process, well...

"I want to stay with Joyce," Eleven repeats, her voice louder and hoarser, dragging Jonathan back to the present moment. Hopper looks frustrated and Karen seems strained, but when Joyce kneels in front of Eleven and takes El's trembling, filthy hands in her own, their expressions soften. Joyce's eyes are warm and they shine with kindness. Jonathan's eyes flick from Eleven to Hopper as both the girl and the man stare down into his mother's face, and it's hard to say which one of them looks more adoring.

What exactly was going on between Joyce and Hopper, Jonathan couldn't say. All he knew was that since Will had been successfully rescued, Hopper had been spending more time than ever with the Byers family. Mostly he hung around the house during his time off and helped Joyce and Jonathan with the multitude of repairs that had to be made in the wake of Jonathan and Nancy's monster trap and the ensuing fire. Hopper didn't fix things the way that Jonathan's father, Lonny, "fixed" things, with a lick and a promise. He was actually surprisingly handy for a man who had been spending most of his weekends in an alcoholic stupor. Whereas Lonny's idea of fixing the hole in the living room wall had been to haphazardly nail a few boards over the open space, Hopper pried the boards up and carefully repaired the empty space with drywall, insulation, and plaster.

"There's still a lot of work to be done," Hopper would say to Jonathan frequently, looking around the Byers house with a furrowed brow and his hands on his hips, but he always sounded pretty happy about it.

"My house is not a good place for you to stay right now, sweetheart,"

Joyce tells Eleven gently. Tears spring to Eleven's eyes and Joyce rushes on. "You can come over to visit absolutely whenever you want, but Hopper and I are still repairing things and it's just a big old mess. Even the boys are sleeping over at friends' houses sometimes." El's eyes flick briefly to Jonathan and Will and then back to Joyce. "Hop talked to Karen Wheeler, Mike's mom, and the three of us decided that it would be best if you stayed here for a while." Eleven's breathing quickens as Karen steps forward tentatively, offering a motherly smile. "I'll come by every day after work to see you," Joyce promises, squeezing El's hands. "And you'll be with your friends. You'll get to be with Mike and Nancy."

Every muscle in Mike's body seems to be motionlessly straining towards Eleven, as if to scream "Notice me! Acknowledge me! Look at me, once!" but it's Nancy, who steps back into the room as if on cue with a pile of soft pastels in her arms, who seems to be the real selling point. Eleven looks at the older girl with shy admiration, and Joyce smiles. She remembers what it was like to be that age, stuck in the decidedly unglamorous world of middle-schoolers, looking up to ordinary high school girls because their lives seemed dramatic and exciting—except in this case, the older girl in question actually had experienced genuine moments of drama and excitement.

Nancy approaches Eleven with an expression that's practically as motherly as Karen's. "I know it's not quite bedtime yet, but I thought you might like to change right into something warm and comfy, so I brought you some pajamas," she says softly. "There's a bathroom down the hall where you can change, I'll show you."

Eleven rises from the couch slowly, unclasping Joyce's hands only after Joyce promises not to leave without saying goodbye. Nancy leads Eleven from the room, and Mike stands abruptly. "Where are you going?" Dustin asks him, his raised eyebrows disappearing under his tangle of curls.

"N-nowhere," Mike stammers, sitting just as suddenly as he had stood. He's still wearing the same dazed look he's had since they got the phone call from Hopper that he was coming over with Eleven.

"I ought to take you boys home," Hopper tells Dustin and Lucas, but they immediately work themselves into an indignant frenzy, insisting

that like Joyce, they can't betray Eleven by leaving without a proper goodbye. The police chief relents, too exhausted to argue, and the boys, giddy past the point of exhaustion, whoop and high-five. Will grins at his friends but leans more heavily into Jonathan's side, clearly tired from the evening's excitement.

Eleven won't let Nancy close the door fully, so she stands guard outside with her back to the crack of light spilling from the bathroom. She thinks briefly of the night she first undressed in front of Steve. There's a football game tonight, but of course Nancy didn't go. It's a chilly autumn night, and she finds herself wondering which "lucky" freshman girl is huddled, giggling, in (or under) the bleachers with him tonight. She supposes it's no longer really any of her business, now that they've been broken up for almost five months.

Nancy had to give Steve some credit. He had really tried to be a good boyfriend. He wasn't without his good qualities either—he could be funny, generous, thoughtful, and brave. Eventually, though, Nancy couldn't keep ignoring the hard knot of cruelty inside him that seemed to make itself known at the worst of times. Tommy and Carol may have egged on Steve's bullying, but Nancy would never forget the sharp, eager glint in his eyes when he accused Jonathan of killing his own little brother. It was an idea so grotesque and upsetting that Nancy still felt sick to her stomach when she remembered the exchange. Steve was a good friend—as long as you were on his side. At the first blush of disagreement, he grew defensive and petulant, and quick to lash out. Nancy, midway through her junior year and knee-deep in college applications, simply doesn't have time for someone like Steve in her life anymore.

Looking down the hallway towards the living room, Nancy watches Will snuggle into Jonathan's one-armed embrace. Jonathan catches her eye and smiles. They rarely find a chance to have an actual conversation, but they have developed a greeting for each other that at least acknowledges their shared battle. Jonathan raises his right hand in what's almost a wave, palm open and out. Nancy mimics him, as she had many times before in the past few months, holding up her hand to display a scar that matches Jonathan's. For a moment they gaze at each other, the long, straight lines of their scars gleaming silver-white.

Nancy looks away first, peeking around the bathroom door to check on Eleven. To her surprise, she finds El huddled over the bathroom sink, still wearing the dirty pink dress and tall striped socks. Mike's blue jacket and El's sorry excuse for sneakers are crumpled in a pile in the corner. "Everything okay?" Nancy asks cautiously, eyeing El's hunched and shaking back.

When El turns around, there are tears in her eyes. "I tried to put it on," she says in a shaking voice, holding Nancy's old pale-blue flannel nightgown at arm's length, "I got your dress dirty."

Nancy can see a few smudgy fingerprints on the hem and around the collar of the nighty. She wants to pull Eleven into a hug, but she knows it would only frighten her, so instead she just tries to mimic Joyce's soothing tone. "That's totally fine, don't worry about it a bit." She cautiously rests a hand on El's shoulder. "It's not your fault. And besides, these are just pajamas, y'know, for sleeping in."

Nancy shuts the door a bit more, so that it's only open a sliver. "Is that ok? I just want you to feel safe." El nods and Nancy turns on the bathtub's taps, fluttering her fingers under the stream of water to make sure it's not too hot or too cold.

It's only when El stammers "I d-don't want to g-go in the tub," her slender arms wrapped tightly around herself, that Nancy remembers the sensory deprivation tanks and remember that what feels cozy and soothing to someone like herself might be a very different experience for poor Eleven. Nancy calls down the hall for Joyce, and together they help El ease out of her old clothes, which are stiff with grime and so small that it would have been easier to cut her out of them, and into the warm bath. Joyce sits on the floor beside the tub to keep El company while Nancy dashes back to her bedroom for a fresh nightgown.

When she returns, Eleven clambers out of the tub and Nancy immediately wraps her in two fluffy towels and an old quilted bathrobe. El sits on the closed toilet and Joyce gently wipes her face clean with a damp washcloth. Joyce and Nancy turn their backs to her while she changes into the hand-me-down underpants and nightgown—this one white instead of soiled blue—and when they turn back around Nancy is almost dumbfounded by the

transformation. Free of dirt and blood and clad in the girlish white nightgown, Eleven looked like a stage ingénue of old. Her buzzcut having grown out slightly into a gamine pixie, Nancy can't help but conjure associations of Audrey Hepburn in "Sabrina" or "Roman Holiday."

She's not the only one struck by El's dramatic transformation; when Joyce and Nancy come back to the living room with Eleven in tow, Mike once again abruptly stands up and sits down several times in succession, seemingly unsure of what exactly to do with himself. He settles for hovering next to the chair with his narrow butt just barely resting on its arm, striking a "casual" pose that looks anything but.

"Alright boys," Hopper says, rising from his chair as well, "Dustin, Lucas, it's time to say your goodbyes to Eleven. I'm sure you'll see her again tomorrow."

Karen, who had been puttering around in the kitchen as she was wont to do when anxious, flits back into the room at this. "I was thinking I would let the boys sleep over here tonight, Chief Hopper," she explains, "We have plenty of room down in the basement and I know they would like to be together tonight. Besides, Ted is out of town on business so the kids and I were going to order a pizza and watch movies anyway." Hopper shrugs his assent—"It's your funeral"—and Karen shepherds an excited Lucas and Dustin back to the kitchen where they can call their parents for permission. Mike watches her retreating back suspiciously, before exchanging a glance with Nancy. Their type-A mother has never been this gung-ho about spontaneous slumber parties, especially with Dad out of town at his conference. It was the first time their father had been away overnight since before Will disappeared. Nancy nodded back at Mike, making sure it was a gesture so small the Chief wouldn't notice, to indicate that she also found it confusing.

Will leans away from Jonathan and slumps against his mother, resting his head against her chest. "I think I'd better go home with you, Mom," he whispers, "I'm pretty tired."

"I know, honey," Joyce says, stroking Will's hair and exchanging a concerned look with Hopper over his head that Jonathan doesn't miss. She holds out her free arm for Eleven and embraces both children. They're both so small that she can easily enfold them both

in her arms. “Goodnight, El, sweetie. We’ll be back to visit some more tomorrow.”

Eleven reluctantly pulls away from Joyce and Nancy stepped forward, her arms full of the Byers’ coats and Hopper’s sheriff’s jacket. As she leans down to help Will with his scarf, Joyce’s younger son presses his lips to her ear and whispers something.

“Hey Hop,” Joyce asks, winding her own scarf around her neck, “Would you mind driving us home?”

“Sure,” Hopper replies, shrugging on his jacket and grabbing his hat, “But I thought you came over in the car.”

“Yeah, we did, but I thought it might be nice if Jonathan hung out here a little bit longer. He can have the car.”

“What?” Nancy and Jonathan blurt together in awkward unison, followed immediately by equally uncomfortable silence. Nancy is still clutching Jonathan’s coat.

“Well, what with Ted being out of town and all, I’m sure Karen and Nancy could use the help corralling the boys, especially,” Joyce explains, smiling at Jonathan. Her voice is innocent but there’s a knowing twinkle in her eye. “And it would be nice for you and Nancy to have a chance to catch up.”

Nancy stares at the floor, hugging Jonathan’s coat against her chest. Jonathan curls his fist around the scar on his palm, as if it were something that would slip away if he didn’t hold onto it.

“I’ll stay,” he says, finally, and from the very corner of his eye, he could almost swear he sees Nancy blush.

2. The Example

Karen cheerfully declares Eleven “Queen for the Day” even though the sun has set and even Holly could have told that it was nighttime. The children are too rattled by Karen’s newfound enthusiasms for sleepovers to say anything.

Karen sets El up in Ted’s recliner (which they technically weren’t allowed to sit in) with blankets wrapped around her shoulder and folded over her lap. She gets out the special TV tray table for her and serves her Kraft macaroni and cheese. “It’s nothing fancy,” she tells El, almost apologetic, “But it’s ‘comfort food.’” El doesn’t know that means but she eats it, gamely, with a fork. She’s still clumsy with the utensil, holding in a tight fist, but she goes slowly and doesn’t drop a single noodle.

Mike watches her from across the living room with his heart in his stomach. He’d never seen her eat with a fork before. He didn’t think she could do it. But it looked like she had been practicing. Had someone else been teaching her things? Had she made a new friend? After all, it had been almost an entire year since last he’d seen her. He can’t bear to think of all the adventures she had without him, while he languished in Pre-Algebra and Language Arts and Phys Ed. He wouldn’t be happy until she had told him every last thing that had happened while she was away, sparing no detail. Better yet, maybe she could tell him that not much had happened at all and in fact she had been very bored and lonely without him.

Karen peruses the shelf of VHS tapes in their cardboard sleeves before landing on an old favorite, its’ casing scuffed and battered. “Have you ever seen *Singin’ in the Rain*?” she asks Eleven reflexively, going red when she realizes what a ridiculous question that is. Eleven shakes her head ‘No’ politely while Mike glares at the back of his mother’s head. “Oh. Well. I thought I’d put it on for you to watch while you eat. It’s very light and cheerful and...” Karen trails off, looking desperately at Nancy. “It’s good, isn’t it, Nancy?”

Nancy, who hadn’t been paying attention to what her mother was

saying while she hung up Jonathan's coat and scarf with more care and gentleness than was strictly necessary, starts from her reverie. "Hmm?"

"It is good," Jonathan jumps in helpfully, "It's really funny."

"You like *Singin' in the Rain*?" Nancy asks incredulously.

"Yeah, it was my grandma's favorite movie of all time. My mom and I watch it sometimes when it comes on TV."

Karen beams gratefully at Jonathan; Nancy's face is unreadable. "Great," Karen proclaims, "I think you'll really enjoy this." She starts the tape and beckons to Mike. "Mike, why don't you join me and your friends in the kitchen. Nancy and Jonathan can keep your friend company while she eats her supper."

Mike frowns. "Why can't I eat in here with El?"

Karen's smile is tight and thin-lipped now. "Please come join me in the kitchen, Michael."

Grumbling, Mike follows his mother out of the living room. Nancy and Jonathan sit a careful distance apart from each other on the couch and turn their faces towards the glow of the screen, happy to have an excuse not to talk. El is still focused on carefully maneuvering her macaroni from the bowl to her mouth.

Inside the kitchen, Mike finds Dustin and Lucas seated in front of their own bowls of orange Kraft macaroni. "I know you said we were ordering pizza, Mrs. Wheeler, but I gotta tell ya, this stuff is just as good," Dustin announces happily.

"I'm glad, Dustin. You're always welcome to seconds."

"That is his seconds," Lucas remarks. "Just check the empty pot."

"Screw you, Lucas!"

Karen sighed. "Dustin, language please."

"Sorry, Mrs. Wheeler."

Karen goes to the refrigerator and pulls out a Tupperware. "Michael, have a seat, I'll heat up some leftovers for you."

"I'm not hungry," Mike complains, "I just want to be with—"

"Sit. Down." Karen commands through gritted teeth. All three boys fall silent as Mike goes to his usual seat and slumps low in it. His mother fixes him a plate of chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes, and places it in front of him.

"Now," Karen says, sitting across from Mike at the kitchen table and taking a moment to eye each of the boys, "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to allow Eleven to stay with us for the foreseeable future." Lucas and Dustin gasp happily but Mike doesn't even flinch, waiting for the other shoe to drop. "But first...you are going to tell me everything—and I mean *everything*, Michael Theodore Wheeler—about what happened last fall."

The boys are silent for a long moment before Mike says, "Deal."

Lucas and Dustin both whisper-shout their protests at him, mostly for fear of getting in trouble with their own parents, but Mike ignores them. "You guys, it's worth it. El needs a place to stay and I want her to stay here. It'll be really good for her to be with...Nancy," he finishes, his sister's name an obvious afterthought.

Karen looks slightly less stressed now, her posture less rigid. "Under normal circumstances, I would of course pass on stories of any wrongdoing straight to your parents. *However*...the situation being what it is, that is to say, pretty exceptional, I will keep everything you tell me to myself. Although Mike's father will need to hear it as well. I don't like keeping secrets in this family," she finishes, reminding Karen of what Nancy had said to him once. He had grown a lot closer with his older sister since their team effort to rescue Will from the demigorgon, but when he thinks of the way Nancy looks at Jonathan he knows there are still some secrets they don't share, can't share.

Back in the living room, El has finished her mac and cheese and sits absolutely transfixed by *Singin' in the Rain*. Nancy and Jonathan find themselves looking away from the screen every other minute just to

take in her stare of transported delight. "Do you like the movie?" Nancy asks quietly, taking great care not to sound condescending.

"Beautiful," El breathes. "It's like a good dream. The way they move."

"Dancing."

"Dancing," El repeats. "Dancing." She glances away from the screen for the first time. "Like a school dance?"

Nancy laughs. "I wish. It's sort of like that, but less fancy. A lot less fancy."

El points at the screen. "Will we dance like that?"

"No, not quite like that," Nancy says with a wry smile. "It will be simpler."

"I've never danced before," Eleven explains plainly, sounding embarrassed.

"It's easy," Jonathan reassured her, "You're got nothing to worry about. Seriously, if I can do it, anyone can."

"You dance?"

Now it's Jonathan's turn to look embarrassed. "Not like that," he says, pointing to the TV screen.

"Show me."

"What?"

Eleven looks at him with good-natured curiosity. "Show me. How you dance."

"You don't want to miss the movie," Nancy offer feebly.

"I don't have any music," Jonathan says at the same time, doggedly ignoring the dance music emanating from the speakers below the TV—they are watching a musical.

"Oh come on," Nancy sighs, trying to sound flippant, "Let's just show her and then she'll know. And we can get back to watching the movie."

"I've seen it a hundred times," Jonathan admits with a half smile, allowing Nancy to take up his hands and place them on her slender hips. He only hopes that she doesn't feel his quickening heartbeat in his pulse as her fingers slide momentarily over his wrist. Eleven watches them with great interest. Behind them, Gene Kelly bursts into song.

*Life was a song
You came along
I've laid awake the whole night through...*

They sway gently to the soft, romantic music.

"I used to want to be a dancer," Nancy says, just to have something to say.

"I can tell," Jonathan replies.

Nancy smirks at him. "How?" They're not really dancing, just holding each other and shifting their weight from foot to foot. "Because I'm so graceful?"

"Your necklace." His eyes fall to the ballet shoe pendant and the pale line of her collarbone. "You wear it everyday."

Nancy lifts her hand from Jonathan's shoulder to touch her pendant. "My grandpa gave it to me at my first ballet recital. I've been wearing it a lot since he passed."

Jonathan nods in understanding.

*You were meant for me
And I was meant for you...*

When Nancy lets go of her pendant, she rests her hand on the back of Jonathan's neck instead of his shoulder, and for a moment, her fingers toy with the fringe of his soft brown hair. He stares down at her mouth and she looks down at his chest, suddenly unable to meet

his eye.

*You're like a plaintive melody
That never lets me free
But I'm content...*

By the time Eleven says "I understand now," and turns her attention back to the film, they've forgotten she was there at all.

It takes Mike, Lucas, and Dustin almost the entire length of the rather long movie to explain everything that happened with Will and Eleven and the lab and the woods and the demigorgon. By the time they're done, poor Karen is speechless. They sit in silence for a few moment, before Karen slowly rises from her chair. "I need some time to process all of this. I'm going to go check on your little sister. Get a good's night sleep tonight." She stops, seemingly on the point of leaving the room, and turns back, taking the time to kiss Dustin and Lucas each on the tops of their heads. She embraces Mike for a long moment before ruffling his hair and leaving the room, unshed tears sparkling behind her long, dark lashes.

"Your mom is weird," Dustin offers.

"Shut up," Mike retorts reflexively.

"All moms are weird," Lucas counters, and Mike can't actually argue with that.

He returns to the living room at once, eager to be by El's side but trying to hide his complete lack of cool. She's still curled up in his dad's recliner, watching Jonathan spread out blankets and arrange pillows on the couch.

"I'm gonna take off once I get El set up for bed here. Is there anything else I can help you with before I go?" Jonathan asks expectantly.

Yes, Mike thinks, *you can leave*. He wishes he had telekinetic powers like El so that he could just force the older boy out of the room. He hadn't had a chance to talk to El alone since she had reappeared, and it was killing him, especially since she was still avoiding making eye contact with him.

"Thanks, Jonathan," El says softly as Jonathan shrugs on his winter coat.

"No problem, El. Have a good night. G'night, Mike. Say thanks to your mom for me, ok?"

"Ok, g'night," Mike responds quickly. *Get out, get out, get out.*

Jonathan shouts a quick goodnight down the basement stairs to Dustin and Lucas, who holler back.

"Where's Nancy?" Mike asks.

"She's getting ready for bed. I don't want to bother her, but I'll see her at school." Jonathan is suddenly as ready to leave as Mike is for him to go. "Bye, guys."

He ducks out the front door and Mike and Eleven are finally alone. He's been waiting and waiting to talk to her, but as their eyes meet, he finds that he has no idea what to say. It's almost a relief when Nancy come dashing in in her butter yellow nightgown with the white ribbons. "Where's Jonathan?" she asks, a little frantic.

"He just left," Mike tells her, and the words are hardly out of his mouth before Nancy is slipping her feet into her loafers and stepping out the front door without so much as a coat.

"She likes him," Eleven states matter-of-factly.

"I know."

They fall silent again. The only thing he can ask is the only thing on his mind: "Where did you go? When you were gone?"

Eleven shrugs off the quilt around her shoulders. "I can't talk about that yet."

Mike accepts this. He's learned that no good will ever come from pushing her to talk about something painful that she's not ready to talk about.

It's one of the reasons why she likes him.

He blushes as he asks his next question, which somehow sounds far more pathetic than the first one. "Why wouldn't you look at me, or talk to me? Until now?"

"I was embarrassed."

He didn't know that she ever felt embarrassed. "Why?"

"I was embarrassed for you to see me so..." She seems to be searching for the right words in her somewhat limited vocabulary. "Dirty. Wild. Not like a person at all."

"I don't mind."

Her eyes flash and she stands, slipping off the last of the throw blankets. "I do, I mind."

They stare each other down. Mike can feel his hands shaking. He can see the vague outline of her thin body under the white nightgown, and he knows he shouldn't want to look but he does.

"Were you scared," Eleven taps her finger to the place where the bridge of her nose meets the corner of her eye, "When you saw me with my red eyes?"

Mike thinks back to the last time they were together. "I wasn't scared of you. I was scared *for* you, though."

She almost smiles at that. "Lie."

Mike only shrugs in response.

"You're changed."

"Me? I've changed?" He parrots back to her incredulously. He feels like he's been stuck here being his same old boring self in his same old boring life while she went on another wild adventure and came back looking like a movie star. "You're the one who's changed."

"Maybe we both changed," she offered, as a compromise.

"How d'you mean?"

Eleven runs a flat hand across the top of her head, ruffling her short hair, and gestures across to Mike's head. "We used to be the same. But you grew."

She says it in such a way that Mike's not sure whether to be flattered or insulted. He has grown a lot over the past year—he's easily the tallest of his friends—and when he stood up straight, although he rarely did, you could see the beginnings of a masculine squareness to his shoulders and chest. Mike had learned from TV that women liked tall men, but now El's tone was making him second-guess himself. "I'm taller. But I'm still the same me."

Eleven shakes her head in disagreement. "I wore your blue jacket. It wouldn't fit you anymore."

"I guess not."

She smooths her delicate hands over the front of her nightgown, pressing the fabric against the shape of her body, and Mike gulps heavily, taking a nervous step away from her. "It doesn't fit me anymore either."

"I guess not," he repeats dumbly, before asking, "Does it make you sad? That we don't look so...the same, anymore?"

El turns the question over in her mind for a few of the longest moments of Mike's life. "It makes me a little sad," she admits, and he wilts instantly. "But mostly it's ok."

"Yeah?" He hangs his head and peers at her through his long, dark bangs.

"You look pretty...nice," she tells him, and even though Mike's pretty sure she's making fun of him, his heart leaps all the same.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't want to overly sexualize young characters like Mike and Eleven, but I imagine that at the beginning of this fic they'd be around 12/13 years old. That is an age at which many young people do start to become more aware of their own bodies and

sexualities, and I'd like to explore that idea, especially since I doubt Eleven knows much about "the birds and the bees," so to speak, and if I were in her shoes I'd find puberty and my wildly changing body extremely confusing.

Thanks for the reviews! I really appreciate them, and looking over them honestly helps me figure out in which direction I should be steering the focus and flow of the story. I hope you are enjoying the story so far!

3. The Passenger

Jonathan puts the keys in the ignition and his car groans to a start. He flicks the headlights on and jumps when they reveal what looks like a ghostly figure. It's Nancy, pale against the darkness, shivering in a thin yellow nightgown. Jonathan starts to roll down his window at her to yell that she should get back inside, but Nancy's already running for his unlocked passenger side door. She clambers in and slams the door behind her.

"Nancy!" Jonathan scolds her, completely incredulous, "Get back inside the house! It's way too cold to be outside without a coat on. What are you thinking?"

"Don't be such a w-w-worrywart," Nancy stutters through chattering teeth. "Y-you didn't say g-goodbye."

"Well, that's no reason to freeze to death," he snaps in response. "You're so lucky Mom makes us keep a blanket in here for emergencies."

"B-blast the heat."

"I've got it turned all the way up, Nance, it takes time for the car to warm up." Jonathan rummages around in the backseat and pulls out a thick wool blanket, which he unfolds and starts to wrap around Nancy before he realizes how very close they are and how low-cut her nightgown is. He drops the edges of the blanket and Nancy draws it closer around her body.

"Wh-why are you angry?"

Jonathan sighs and pushes a few long hairs away from his eyes. "I'm not angry. I'm—I'm just tired. It's been a long night, y'know?"

"Yeah." Nancy's teeth have stopped chattering but she's still trembling beneath the blanket.

He laughs an exasperated laugh, shaking his head. "You're ridiculous, Nancy."

"You didn't say goodbye."

"What does it matter? Honestly?" Jonathan asks, raising his voice.

Nancy leans back in her seat, tightening the blanket around her. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You're mad at me for not saying goodbye tonight? Seriously? Come on, Nancy. Tonight was the most time we've spent together since Will came back and we spent the entire night babysitting a fugitive preteen telekinetic."

"Well, when you put it like that, it sounds so romantic," Nancy interjects sarcastically.

"Don't make fun of me." Jonathan's voice is suddenly low and quiet. "I can't bear it, Nancy."

"I'm sorry." Nancy's voice catches in her throat. "I didn't mean to give you the cold shoulder. I've always tried to be nice—"

"I don't need you to be nice to me. I don't want your pity and I never have."

"I don't—"

Jonathan presses on with a determined glint in his eye, though he's unable to meet Nancy's gaze. "I just want to stop pretending that what happened didn't happen."

Nancy is silent for a moment, and when she speaks, she chooses her words deliberately. "You mean...that we fought and captured an actual monster?"

"That's part of it." He turns to face her, finally. "Nancy, we hunted a monster and caught it with a bear trap. We helped a girl with real life, actual goddamn superpowers. We both lost someone...And I spent the night in your bed."

Jonathan's final words ring like shots fired in the utter silence that follows.

When Nancy speaks, she's fighting tears, damp-eyed and shaking. "I—I know we've been through a lot together. And that's—it is important to me. It really does matter. But after—after everything that happened and what he saw and how he felt, for Steve and I to stay together, I had to—to promise him that you would be more of, well, more of a friendly acquaintance."

"You broke up with Steve more than four months ago," Jonathan shoots back immediately.

"Well, I couldn't just waltz up to you in the hallways like nothing had happened after ignoring you for half a year! I was embarrassed!" Nancy looks very pretty when she's upset, with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, but Jonathan refuses to allow himself to feel sorry for her. "And of course I felt terrible about the whole thing!"

Jonathan finally asks a question that had been nagging him for nearly a year, one he had promised himself he would never actually speak aloud. "Why did you stay with Steve?"

"Barb."

The instant the syllable is out of Nancy's mouth, she leans forward, clinging to the blanket, and bursts into sobs that rack her whole body. Jonathan is shocked. "But—didn't Barb kinda hate Steve?" It's probably not the most sensitive question he's ever asked a crying woman, but he's too surprised by her violent response to be diplomatic.

"It's all my fault she died!" Nancy wails, so loudly that Jonathan is worried her mother will hear her back in the house. "I was so focused on stupid fucking Steve that I couldn't tear myself away for one goddamn, awful night!" Jonathan has never heard Nancy swear so much but it's evident from the pain in her cries that that any semblance of a polite social filter has fallen away, in a way that it hasn't since they stalked the monster together. "She was there with me, because I made her go. She wouldn't have been bleeding if I hadn't made her try to shotgun a beer! Oh God, saying it makes it sound even worse." Nancy is crying like an animal, raw moans of grief punctuating her phrases. "I'm a terrible person."

"You're not. Nancy, you're not." Jonathan places a tentative hand on her trembling back, but it makes no difference.

"She was my best friend. My best friend. We did everything together! And the notes....Oh God, Jonathan, I have boxes and boxes of the notes she wrote me. I can still perfectly mimic her handwriting. The way she made the 'Y' in N-N-Nancy." Nancy buries her face in her hands as her sobs redouble. She's gasping so hard that Jonathan's starting to grow worried she might faint.

But after about a minute of full-body sobbing, she collects herself and continues in a flat, emotionless voice that frightens him almost as much as the crying. "So, you see, I had to stay with Steve. Because if I didn't, then I was just some girl who got my innocent best friend killed over a random guy who wanted to fuck me. If I didn't stay with Steve, then Barb died for someone who didn't even matter." Nancy furrows her brow deeply, looking disgusted with herself. "I guess that's exactly what happened."

"Nancy." Jonathan takes her scarred hand in his own. "It's not your fault."

She doesn't look at him, but stares straight ahead into the night, tears rolling silently down her already damp cheeks.

"There was a monster in our town. An honest-to-God, real-life-monster! You couldn't have known. Barb could have tripped and skinned her knee on the way to her car in the library parking lot and gotten attacked." Nancy doesn't look convinced, but Jonathan doesn't let it drop. "It was a horrible set of circumstances. That's absolutely true." Jonathan takes a deep breath to steady himself before going on. "I was working late the night Will went missing. And so was my mom. I was supposed to be at home, making sure that he got back on time. And if I had been...well, who knows?"

"Jonathan, you can't—"

"No, you can't, Nancy!" Jonathan interrupts her interruption. "If it wasn't my fault that Will went missing than it wasn't your fault that Barb went missing. Maybe it's not fair for me to say I know how you feel, since Will came back—"

“No—“ Nancy clutches his hand tightly. “You do know how I feel. You’re the only one who does.”

“The blanket has slipped off of Nancy’s thin shoulder and Jonathan uses his free hand to pull it back into place. Nancy almost smiles at him, her lips trembling. “I’m sorry about my...freak out.”

Jonathan shrugs. “I think it was warranted, to say the least. And like I said, I’d rather talk about it than not talk about it. But maybe if we talked about it more often, it would be less...traumatic. For both of us.”

“Maybe,” Nancy echoes doubtfully.

“Do you cry like that a lot?”

Nancy considers the question seriously. “Not that hard. I usually have to muffle it with a pillow so my mom and Mike won’t hear me. I think sometimes Mom hears me faintly on the baby monitor and checks on Holly.” Nancy smiles like it’s all some big joke and Jonathan feels as if someone is actually pressing on his aching heart with their entire weight.

But if she wants to end the night on an upbeat note, he’s all for it. “I still can’t believe you ran out here without a coat on. I think the type-A teacher’s pet Nancy Wheeler all of Hawkins knew and loved is officially a thing of the past.”

Nancy grimaces bitterly. “I wouldn’t say all of Hawkins loved Nancy ‘The Slut’ Wheeler.”

“I’m sure everyone has forgotten about that stupid graffiti by now,” Jonathan lies, and then blushes slightly, looking down. “And you’re not. A slut.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“I don’t think there is such a thing.”

Nancy lifts a brow. “Such a thing as what?”

Jonathan looks embarrassed but reluctantly repeats the word. “Sluts.

It's just a nasty word guys use to degrade women who have had sex. But there's nothing actually wrong with women having—or anyone, really having—what I mean is—“

“I get it,” Nancy jumps in graciously, saving him from himself.

Nancy knew that there was nothing wrong with girls wanting to have sex just like boys did, but it was different to know something intellectually and to actually internalize it. When she remembered the rather awkward and unsatisfying dozen or so sexual encounters she'd had with Steve, Nancy mostly felt embarrassed. In fact, the entire ordeal had made her completely lose her appetite for sexual contact for a good long time.

“Well,” she says, “I should probably get back inside. My mom might check in on me. That's a thing she does, surprise surprise. ‘Cause you know she—”

“Doesn't knock,” they finished in unison, harkening back to the morning after their night together. They are still holding hands.

“Does your mom knock?”

“I guess,” Jonathan chuckles. “It's not really knocking, it's more like banging. She kinda has to bang on the door to be heard over the music.”

Nancy nods and privately decides that that information might be useful someday.

“Thanks for the blanket.” Nancy pulls it off her shoulders, revealing her body in a pale yellow nightgown beneath it. “You can have it back now.”

Jonathan forgets to be a gentleman, and in the long moment before he looks away he takes her in—her dark hair curling around her bare shoulders, the sharp line of her clavicle above the nightgown's low neckline, the outline of her breasts through the soft fabric.

Nancy watches Jonathan's face while he stares at her and finds his expression appropriately reverent and flustered. Maybe she would like to have sex again, after all.

But not tonight.

“Goodnight, Jonathan.” Nancy squeezes his hand and then releases it, darting from the car and racing back to the house through the cold. He watches as the lights in her bedroom window turn on and then off again.

The interior of his car smells like her vanilla shampoo and he thinks maybe it would be safer to walk home.

Instead he rolls down his window. The cold air is bracing and it clears his head. By the time he gets home, the vanilla scent is gone and he misses it. And he hates himself for missing it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi folks! Bit of a shorter chapter this time, but I thought you guys might like a fast update. What was originally going to be the back half of this chapter, featuring Joyce and Hopper, Eleven and Mike, and Karen, will be coming within the next couple of days. I don't know how long I'll be able to keep up this updating pace because I have a day job and another career in the arts on top of that but I will do my best because I do feel very inspired by "Stranger Things."

I don't really have a plan for the story, with the exception of a few notes jotted here and there, so I don't know how many chapters it will be.

I hope this chapter came off as sex positive. I did not want to make it seem like Jonathan was trying to

mansplain feminism to Nancy. I actually feel feminism is a topic 1980s teens in Indiana likely had little access to, at least in Hawkins. It just makes sense to me that Jonathan, a character with a single mother and a taste for offbeat music, would have more liberated beliefs about sex. I think Nancy is a smart girl who probably touched on novels with feminist themes if not feminist tracts in high school, but she would have been subject to period-typical misogyny that would likely have trickled down to negatively influence her understanding of female sexuality. Of course, none of that is canon, this is just my own interpretation. But I did want to clarify that exchange.

Oh and I don't hate Steve...I've just dated a Steve in the past. And I moved on to a Jonathan, and things are A LOT better now. Seriously. It's eerie how perfectly that analogy fits.

I'm rambling...Please review! I really appreciate all the reviews I've gotten so far. Thank you!

4. The Hare

Notes for the Chapter:

A/N: I'm doing my best to continue updating at a steady clip. This chapter was originally structured as the back half of Chapter Three. Apparently I have a lot of Karen Wheeler feelings? Please enjoy!

Karen Wheeler awakes to the sound of muffled crying from the baby monitor around midnight. Momentarily disoriented, she gropes for a body in the bed beside her and is frightened when she finds none, before remembering that Ted is in Cincinnati for work. Elegant even when waking from a deep slumber, she rises from the creaking double bed and wraps herself in her quilted blue robe.

Nancy, Michael, Holly. Nancy, Michael, Holly. It's like a mantra, or rather, a checklist, constantly repeating itself in Karen's head. *Where's Nancy? Where's Michael? Where's Holly?*

It wasn't always this way. She used to pride herself on being an "involved" parent but not a "helicopter parent." But the disappearance of Will Byers and the ensuing peril that her own children found themselves in had driven any notion of parenting theory out of Karen's head. Now there was only the practice, the primal urge to protect her children by any means necessary.

Karen couldn't totally explain why suddenly her idea of keeping her children safe included inviting a girl who could murder people with her mind into the family home. But primal instinct went both ways, and Karen couldn't shake the strong feeling that Eleven was not only a good person at heart, but a profoundly damaged child who deserved a chance at a healthy, normal life. Karen had trusted her gut when it told her that her family was in grave danger, even though her husband had assumed she was only being paranoid. And she had been right. She saw no reason to distrust herself now.

Besides, if her family was still in danger, could it really hurt to have a powerful telekinetic on their side?

Karen shuffles down the hallway to Holly's room. Passing Nancy's room, she opens the door a crack and peeks inside. Nancy's brown curls are spread out on the pillow, her duvet tucked up to her cheeks. Karen closes the door quietly and continues to Holly's room, where she finds her youngest daughter fast asleep and peaceful. This sort of thing was happening increasingly frequently when Karen checked on Holly. Maybe she was getting better with self-soothing as she grew older.

When Nancy was born, Karen was twenty-four years old. She used to think about how old she would be when Nancy graduated high school—forty-two years old. That age had seemed impossibly old to her then, but she was forty-one now, and Nancy was a junior. Ted, on the other hand, would be fifty-five when Nancy graduated next spring. When Holly graduated high school in fifteen years, he would be seventy. *If he lives that long*, Karen worries in spite of herself, feeling a prickle of fear down the back of her neck and trying not to think about the heart attacks that had killed Ted's own father when Nancy was just a baby. She had never felt more sympathy for Joyce Byers; the possibility of becoming a single mother was looming larger and larger in her mind with every passing year. Perhaps, she thinks sadly, she had no right to take on a child with special emotional and educational needs.

Her own mother had often told her it was “always better to err on the side of righteousness”—it was always better to *try* to do the right thing even if you turned out to be wrong later.

Karen finds Michael's bedroom empty. She would have been panicked, if not for the fact that she really isn't surprised.

He's absolutely devoted to that girl. Karen still can't quite wrap her head around it. She'd never even considered that he was developing an actual interest in girls; after all, he spent so much time cloistered in the basement with Lucas, Dustin, and Will. To Karen's mind, that was as it should be. They were children. Michael was her baby.

But over the past few months, his growth spurt had kicked in, and Karen could no longer deny the visual proof that her little boy was growing up—even if he did have the same big, sad brown eyes that had broken her heart the day he was born.

Karen tightens the belt of her robe and ventures downstairs to the living room. She had half-hoped that he would be in the basement with Dustin and Lucas, but Michael is right where she expected him to be—sitting cross-legged on the couch facing Eleven, who sits against the opposite arm of the couch with her knees drawn up to her chin. She looks like a girl from a Dutch painting, wholesome and rosy-cheeked in her little white nightgown.

Karen feels a deep pang of anxiety as she takes in the sight of them. What had she been thinking, throwing two kids together under one roof while they were at their most hormonal? Especially when Eleven doesn't know what Karen's mother used to grimly call "the facts of life." She doesn't quite trust Ted to have a proper sex talk with Michael, so she's going to have to grit her teeth and do it herself, sooner rather than later. She needed to make her son understand that he was not ready to have sex while still imparting vital safety information—but she had thought she'd have more time.

"Michael," Karen says kindly but firmly, "Eleven's had a long night and I'm sure she's very tired. It's time for you to go up to your room and let her sleep."

Mike rolls his eyes luxuriously at his mother but obeys. He drags his feet every step of the way to the stairs, casting baleful looks at Eleven over his shoulder, as if he hopes she will beg Karen to let him stay. When she doesn't, he thunders up the stairs to his room and disappears.

For a long moment, Eleven and Karen take each other in. Eleven's arms, wrapped around her shins, look impossibly thin and delicate. Karen wonders if "mother" is even a word in this child's vocabulary.

It is always better to err on the side of righteousness.

Karen decides to go with her gut. She approaches the couch and kneels beside it. Eleven flinches away from her but maintains eye contact, hugging herself into a tiny ball.

"Would you like me to tuck you in?" Karen asks gently.

"Tuck in?" El repeats blankly, the term clearly foreign.

Karen could have kicked herself. “It means...make you comfortable, so you can go to sleep. Make you feel, well, cozy.”

Eleven is still looking at her with total incomprehension, but she bravely allows Karen to rest her hand on her upper back and help El under the blankets. When Eleven is lying down, Karen carefully tucks several layers of blankets in around her, making sure there are no lumps or twists or places where the cold might blow in.

“Cozy?” Karen asks, hugging herself to try to convey the meaning of the new word.

El almost smiles. “Cozy.”

Karen lays a feather-light kiss on El’s forehead and rises from the carpeted floor. She turns off all the lights except for a small table lamp in the far corner of the room, which casts a dim, warm glow. As she is about to leave the room, Eleven calls out to her softly. “Wait!”

Karen stops and turns. El is tiny beneath the pile of blankets. “I don’t like to be alone,” the child blurts out. It’s the most complex sentence Karen’s ever heard her utter. It’s more than she thought Eleven was capable of right now.

She may have gotten more hip to sleepovers as of late, since she understood that the boys needed each other more than ever after all that they had been through, but she was not yet a hip enough mother to allow boy-girl sleepovers. She would have happily let Eleven sleep on Ted’s side of their bed while he was away, but she didn’t think that Eleven would feel comfortable with that, and Karen didn’t blame her. Besides, it would only be a temporary fix, since Ted would be home soon.

Oh God, Ted would be home soon. Karen really needed to think of a good explanation for this one. Having a third baby had been a hard enough sell as it was.

Like all good mothers, Karen is nothing if not creative in a pinch. “I’ll be right back,” she promises Eleven, quickly tip-toeing back up the stairs and down the hallway to Nancy’s room.

Nancy is fast asleep and breathing slowly. The duvet has fallen away from her face and now Karen can see that Nancy's face is tear-stained and even in slumber, her brows are furrowed. Her lovely face looks sad and womanly.

What are you hiding, my little dove?

Drawing herself back to the task at hand, Karen carefully selects a stuffed animal from a basket in the corner of Nancy's room—a well-loved white snow hare, in good condition, that “Santa” had brought Nancy when she was just a little younger than Eleven.

Karen remembers that Christmas well. Nancy had opened the snow hare's gift bag with delight and turned to her mother at once. “Thank you, Mommy!” It was bittersweet for Karen. Nancy was happy with her present, and she received it so politely, but it was in that moment that Karen knew for sure that her baby girl no longer believed in Santa Claus.

She returns downstairs and gently gives the toy to Eleven, who marvels at its lifelike fur and face. “What is this?”

“It's a snow hare. It's like a bunny, but they live in the frozen tundra.”

“Not bunny...” Eleven trails off, clearly frustrated and unsure as to how to phrase her question. “Action figure?” She guesses, repeating a phrase she'd picked up from Dustin.

“Oh!” Karen understands. “It's called a stuffed animal.”

“I had one,” Eleven chirps, to Karen's shock. She pets the hare's white fur with the tips of her fingers. “I had a stuffed animal. Before.”

Karen's honestly not quite sure how to respond to that. “I'll see you in the morning, sweetheart. You know where my room is, right?” Eleven nods into her pillow, tucking the hare under her chin. “Wake me up if you need anything.”

She returns to her bed and, removing her robe and slippers, slides back under the covers. In spite of everything, the last emotion Karen Wheeler feels before she falls asleep that night is gratitude. She's

grateful for the innocence of children, for in spite of everything Eleven had been through, she could still be comforted by a stuffed animal.

Mike lays awake for hours, watching the numbers on his digital clock flick by. He feels like he is crawling out of his own skin with anticipation, though he cannot pinpoint exactly what it is he is anticipating.

At 2:03 he can bear it no longer, and creeps downstairs to check on El.

To his horror, the couch is empty.

Mike almost falls to his knees. *She's gone*, he thinks, despairing in an instant as only the young and in love can.

There's a faint ding from the kitchen that snaps Mike out of his panic. Sock-footed, he shuffles into the kitchen to find Eleven sitting on the counter, carefully removing two Eggo waffles from the toaster. When she sees him, she looks unfazed. She takes a teeny nibble of the edge of the hot Eggo, and holds out the other to Mike. "Breakfast?"

He feels dizzy with relief. "It's two o'clock in the morning, El."

"You said morning," El points out, smiling and taking a bigger bite of her Eggo.

He takes the proffered waffle from her hand and for a few minutes they munch their snack without speaking. El's enjoying the companionable silence, but Mike has too many questions and he can't hold them all in. "Who taught you all these new words?"

It's the phrasing of the question—"Who taught you," not "How did you learn"—and his almost petulant tone that strikes her. On some level she understands that he's hurt because he thinks she's found a

new friend to replace him in her heart. She could put his fears to rest by admitting that she had picked up the new words not by conversing, but simply by listening to the conversations of strangers for the better part of a year. Eleven's still not ready to talk about her life—if you could call it that—during the time since they last saw each other. And besides...she'd die to protect him, but for some reason his wounded tone here is giving her an odd thrill of unfamiliar excitement.

She has not yet learned the word “jealous.”

She only stares back at him, revealing nothing, sitting on the counter and swinging her thin legs back and forth. Mike slouches and lets his dark hair fall over his own eyes. He is sulky, but not so sulky as to be compelled to return to his room alone.

The next morning, when his mother finds him sprawled out asleep on the floor next to Eleven's couch bed, she doesn't have the heart to scold him. But when Holly wakes up, Karen rocks her for a little longer than usual, and cries, and wishes for a way to turn back time.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm just waiting for my chances to write Steve Harrington and Ted Wheeler into the story...stay tuned.

I have been making an earnest effort to respond to every review I receive! The only exceptions are reviews which only pose questions which, were I to answer them, would spoil the story. I kinda doubt anyone besides me is reading the comments, but heck, I'm gonna try to keep my few little secrets to myself. Thanks so much to those of you who have reviewed so far. I have truly enjoyed the chance to have a dialogue with you.

I've been sitting on a Joyce/Hopper scene for awhile now, so expect that next time, among other things. Please review! And thanks for reading.

5. The Offer

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the extreme delay in an update! The kids I nanny started school for the year and I was very busy getting them ready, as well as juggling my own performance schedule on top of that. The good news is, now that they're in class all day, I have a lot more time to write. This chapter is a bit shorter than most and somewhat transitional, but I hope it will succeed in drawing you back into the story and get you excited for what's to come. Enjoy!

Will falls asleep on the car ride back from the Wheelers' house and Hopper carries him inside with ease, the boy looking smaller and frailer than ever in the police chief's sturdy arms. Joyce follows, and removes Will's coat, scarf, and shoes after Hopper gently lays her son on his bed. Joyce spreads a blanket over him and kisses his forehead, taking great care not to wake him. He sleeps so fitfully these days.

Hopper waits and watches her. They both pause just before leaving his room, as Will begins to cough in his sleep. Frozen in place, they both hold their breath, but nothing happens, and mercifully he does not wake. Joyce slips out first and Hopper closes the door behind them, leaving it open just a crack.

Finally, exhausted from a tumultuous day, they collapse beside each other on the couch. Hopper groans and Joyce rubs her tired eyes. They sit in silence for awhile, until Joyce asks, "Do you think we did the right thing?"

Hopper sighs. "We found a loving home for her to stay at while she tries to get an education. What more can you ask for?"

"But did we do right by the Wheelers?" Joyce presses on, looking anxious. "They know so little about the situation. How can they even understand what they're taking on?"

"Joyce, you know why she can't stay here." Hopper's voice is low and

grave.

In truth, though the house still needed improvements, repairs were not the real reason that Hopper and Joyce had decided that Eleven should stay with the Wheelers instead of the Byers.

Four months into his repairs, Hopper had unearthed some otherworldly-looking leeches in the U-bend plumbing of the bathroom sink. Then, just a few weeks after that, Joyce had watched one of the nasty things slither out of Will's mouth as he coughed while napping on the couch. She had trapped it in an old Mason jar and shown it to Hopper, who agreed that it looked a lot like the tentacles of the Upside-Down world.

Hopper shot the leech and set it on fire, but the memory of it haunted Joyce all the same.

Neither of them was really sure whether they were protecting Will from Eleven, or Eleven from Will.

"Have you been sleeping at all?" Hopper asks gently.

Joyce frowns. "I'm doing my best."

"I know you are. But I worry about you."

"Everybody worries about me," Joyce snaps, half annoyed, half self-deprecating.

Hopper pulls a pack of cigarettes from his interior jacket pocket, giving one to Joyce before clenching another between his own teeth. He lights her first, like she's the leading lady of an old movie. She looks like a Golden Age Hollywood star to him, with her large eyes and high cheekbones, delicate and dramatic in the low light. He lights his own cigarette and takes a deep drag from it.

"Will told me Jonathan likes Nancy Wheeler," Joyce says, artlessly changing the subject.

"I know. I thought everybody knew that."

Joyce almost laughs. "I didn't. I guess I'm not the most observant

mother.”

“You’ve got to stop being so hard on yourself,” Hopper interjects, “I’ve watched you with the boys. You listen to them. You pay attention.”

Joyce takes a quick drag of her cigarette and exhales with a hiss. “I try. It’s harder with Jonathan. He feels everything so deeply, I know he does. But he won’t ever ask me for help.”

“He’s a good kid,” Hopper says sincerely. “I like spending time with him.”

Joyce’s lips twist into a quivering smile, but she doesn’t look at Hopper, her eyes focusing on a framed snapshot of Jonathan and Will as small boys. “You know, Jonathan used to tell me everything. I’d ask, ‘Jonathan, how was your day at school’ and he would tell me, he’d really tell me. I think I actually learned things from him that he had picked up during the day. And then, by the time he was a surly teenager, I had my Will, and he—“ Joyce’s voice breaks. “He would sit at the kitchen table and explain his drawings to me. He would tell me about his dreams. And I thought that I was one of those parents who is ‘in the know.’ Not like one of those dopes who thinks what’s-his-face is studying in his room when he’s really sparking a joint in the garage.” Joyce rolls her eyes at herself, running a hand through her untidy hair in a gesture that recalls her oldest son. “And now—now I know that all this time, they were both keeping secrets from me.”

“All kids keep secrets,” Hopper says calmly.

“Not secrets like these.”

“Oh come on, Joyce.” Hopper stubs out the butt of his cigarette in a nearby ceramic ashtray. “You said yourself that the Wheelers know fuck-all about what was going on with Mike and Nancy.”

“I don’t think I said it like that, exactly.”

“Don’t be a priss, you know what I mean.”

Joyce actually laughs at that. “I think this is officially the first time

anyone's ever accused me of being prissy."

They lapse into an easy silence, and when Joyce speaks again, her voice is calmer.

"I just worry that I've put too much pressure on them to be responsible, to parent themselves when I couldn't. They're both so quick to conceal any negative emotion. I think they're trying to protect my feelings."

"Or, could be that their sorry excuse for a father taught them that even the smallest display of any emotion besides rage is gay, just an idea." Hopper's unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Not that it's my job to play armchair psychologist to someone else's kids. Sorry."

"Oh, don't apologize, Jim. You know the boys better than Lonny does, no doubt about that," Joyce muses.

She yawns and rests her head on Hopper's shoulder, tucking it into the crook of his neck when he leans his cheek on her hair. "I didn't put all that effort into finding Will just to get back in our good graces, I swear." He chuckles and she can feel it rumble through both their bodies, low and warm.

"I know, Hop. You were doing your job."

"I like it better when you call me Jim."

"Jim?"

"Yeah, Jim, my name."

"I always assumed you preferred the nickname. Joyce shrugs and Hopper takes the chance to tuck her more firmly against his side. He rubs his chin, the dry skin of his palm making a sandpapery noise against his stubble. "Sure, sometimes. But hearing you call me Jim... Hell, that takes me right back to high school."

His tone is vaguely suggestive now and Joyce peels herself away from him, trying not to think about how good it feels to have a strong arm wrapped protectively around her side, how good it felt to be part of a

team again.

"I'm fried," she murmurs, stubbing out the smoking remains of her cigarette and running her hands through her dark hair.

"I'll wait up for Jonathan," he offers.

"I don't think you should."

"Why not? You're tired, I've got my truck. Just go to bed and I'll—"

"Jim." Joyce stops him. "We can't do this to the boys anymore."

Hopper furrows his brow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...it's been amazing having you around, helping out with the house. I don't know how we would have gotten through the past year without you—and not just because of the hole in the wall. The boys have grown to look up to you so much and—"

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"You're not being fair." Joyce crosses her arms over her chest protectively. "And you're not—you're not—"

"I'm not their dad," Hopper finishes for her, glaring down at the carpet.

"And I just can't justify letting them believe..." Joyce trails off.

"Letting them believe what?" Hopper looks up and meets her eye. "That I'm going to stick around?"

Joyce looks away.

Hopper takes a step closer. "I would, you know. If you let me."

"Jim."

Hopper takes Joyce's thin, delicate hands in his own large, solid ones. She flinches but doesn't pull away. "Joyce. I'm not Lonny." Joyce looks annoyed and opens her mouth to interject, but Hopper presses on. "I think you're a good parent. Hell, a great one. And I know you

can do this by yourself. But you don't have to."

Open-mouthed, Joyce fumbles for a reply, but before she can find one, they're both startled by car headlights shining in through the front window. It's Jonathan, back from the Wheelers', and Joyce jerks her hands from Hopper's grip, turning her back on him. "Goodnight, Hop."

Hopper's voice is quiet and disappointed, but not resentful. "Night, Joyce. You and the kids need anything, you know where to find me."

Joyce nods.

Hopper and Jonathan cross paths on the concrete stoop of the Byers' house. Jonathan says "Goodnight, sir," and awkwardly tries to hold the screen door open for the police chief. Hopper looks down into the boy's earnest face—as yet unlined by the cares of this world and others—and thinks, with a heavy heart, that Joyce was right to turn him away.

"Night, kid," Hopper replies, resisting the impulse to pat Jonathan on the shoulder as he passes by.

He puts his wide-brimmed hat on his head and climbs into his truck. He doesn't make it far, backing out of the Byers' driveway and pulling just around the corner of the block, so that their living room lights are still visible through the trees. Satisfied, Hopper kills the engine, pulls his hat down over his face, and unceremoniously falls asleep in the driver's seat.

He never did get used to living alone.

Nancy awakens early from a night of fitful, uneasy sleep, feeling just as tired as she had when she had gone to bed. Her dark curls have formed a snarled rat's nest on the back of her head where it rubbed against the pillow. Sighing heavily, Nancy rises from bed and begins picking at the knot drowsily. Her mouth is dry and sour-tasting, so she tiptoes down the hall in pursuit of a fresh glass of water. Mike's bed is empty—*no surprises there*, Nancy thinks with a smirk—and she can hear her mother singing and talking to Holly behind the closed door to her little sister's room.

Nancy pads down the stairs in sock-feet and peers over the railing into the living room. Mike is asleep on the floor next to the couch, his long, gangly limbs flung every which way, his mouth slightly open. But aside from her stuffed toy snow hare, the couch is empty. Eleven is nowhere to be seen.

Trying to stay calm, Nancy creeps down half the flight of stairs to the basement. No El there either, just Lucas and Dustin asleep in the long-standing blanket fort. They both talk in their sleep, so that it sounds like they're carrying on a nonsensical conversation.

Finally, as she climbs back up the basement stairs, Nancy spots Eleven through one of the rear-facing living room windows. El is standing in the back yard, staring out at the shabby fields beyond. She's wearing Mike's new heavy wool jacket over the nightgown, an insistent breeze ruffling her short hair and tugging at the hem of her nightie.

Nancy steps out the back door onto the porch and is about to call out to Eleven when El turns around of her own accord. She looks surprised to see Nancy—and in her surprise she forgets to wipe away the blood trickling steadily from her nose.

The girls stare at each other, dumbfounded. It's hard to say which of them looks more horrified. El pushes past Nancy, back into the house, and rushes to the bathroom. She carefully wipes the blood from her face with a handful of tissues and flushes them down the toilet.

Alone on the back porch, Nancy is left to wonder if Eleven was using her powers to search for someone—or to keep *something* at bay.

Notes for the Chapter:

More updates coming sooner, I promise! Thanks for reading and reviewing-- I'm off to catch up with responses to your comments right now!

6. The Books

Notes for the Chapter:

That's right, two updates in two days, just to say I'm sorry for making you wait so long for that last chapter. Who loves ya? Oh that's right, me!

Judging by some of the reviews, I know a few of you are anxious as to the direction I'm taking the story in, after the darker touches in Chapter 5. As I explained when I started writing this story, this story will not be violent or especially grim in tone. That said, to keep with the feel of the original "Stranger Things" television series, I felt that I needed to include at least whispers of the spookier supernatural elements, along with the family-centric/romantic fluff. The focus of the story will remain on Eleven acclimating to being a part of the normal world, I promise.

Without further ado, please enjoy Chapter 6.

In the year that followed Eleven's disappearance, Mike had kept the blanket fort she had once inhabited intact, to the best of his ability. Sometimes he would turn on his walk-talky and let it sit there, idly running down the batteries, in the hopes that some message from the other side might come through. None ever did, and eventually he learned to be almost content with just sitting in the fort, and imagining (was it imagining?) that he could feel her presence nearby.

Once, when Mike was very sure he was alone, he had pressed his face into the pillow Eleven had used when she had slept in the blanket fort, hoping to pick up some faint smell of her. Only then did he remember that like many things that came from a laboratory, El didn't have much of a scent of her own, smelling only of whatever she took on—the earthy musk of dirt, the salty tang of her sweat, and an ever-present hint of the metallic smell of blood.

Now that El was back and, for the first time ever, free to roam the Wheeler house as she pleased, the whole home took on a sacred

affect in Mike's eyes. He awoke and gave the couch a fond pat as he sat down on it. What had once been an ordinary couch was suddenly an especially comfortable and elegant piece of furniture, beautified by the mere act of El sleeping on it. The blankets crumpled in a heap on the floor were the softest, warmest blankets ever, because she had been wrapped in them. Even his father's threadbare armchair seems both adorable and noble to him this morning.

After hastily smoothing his bedhead down with his palms, Mike goes to the kitchen. To his surprise, he finds only Eleven, Holly, and his mother seated around the table. Holly is carefully picking up individual Cheerios from the tray of her highchair and passing them to Eleven, who accepts them gamely. Karen is sipping her coffee, already dressed and impeccably coiffed. Mike checks the clock over the oven, which reads 9:04.

"I'm late for school," he tells his mother, unnecessarily.

"I know," she replies. "Jonathan Byers already came by to pick up Nancy, Dustin, and Lucas. I've decided to let you stay home today, on the condition—"

"What?" Mike interrupts, excited. Karen never lets them play hooky.

"Michael, it's rude to interrupt." Karen picks a tiny piece of lint off her neat sweater set and brushes it away. "Yesterday was a long and eventful day for all of us, and I just didn't have it in me to listen to you whine about being allowed to stay home with Eleven, as we both know you would have. So, as I was saying, you will be allowed to stay home from school today *on the condition* that you babysit Holly for a few hours this afternoon when she gets home from preschool. I need to take Eleven shopping for clothes and school supplies."

"I could come to the store with you."

Karen raises her eyebrows. "What would I do with you in a women's fitting room, young man?"

Mike goes red and shrugs. Eleven, who has no idea what a "fitting room" could be or why Mike is blushing, looks between him and his mother with curiosity.

“So it’s settled,” Karen says firmly, finishing off the last of her coffee. “You’ll watch your little sister while El and I shop. It will only take a couple of hours, and you can have the rest of the day together. Enjoy your special long weekend, Michael, because come Monday you’ll be back at Hawkins Middle if I have to march you there myself.”

Though her tone is matter-of-fact, Mike can see that she is smiling, and a sudden rush of affection for his mother propels him into her arms for a hug. Karen kisses him on the forehead, ruffling his hair as he pulls away. “I’m going to drop Holly off at preschool, then I’m taking some pastries to First Lutheran for the bake sale. You and Eleven can do whatever you want, but please get dressed first—don’t lie around in pajamas all day. And don’t use the stove, or the oven.”

There is a muted rattle of loose Cheerios hitting the linoleum floor as Karen tugs Holly up and out of her high chair. “Bye bye!” Holly waves back at Mike and Eleven. Karen efficiently bundles the toddler in a coat, hat, scarf, and mittens—by kid number three, she’s got the winterwear shuffle down to a science—pulls on her own stylish belted peacoat, and marches out the door, using one arm to wrangle Holly and the other to carry her bag of bake sale treats.

Now Mike and Eleven are alone, really alone. Eleven is clumsily stabbing at a slice of apple pie with a fork.

“Mom never lets us have pie for breakfast,” Mike observes, just to fill the silence.

“Karen said,” Eleven points to herself, “Queen for the Day.”

“That was yesterday.”

Eleven lifts her wrist to reveal one of Karen’s old watches. It hangs limply on her narrow wrist. She taps the face with her finger. “Twenty-four hours.”

Mike smiles. The new Eleven is as endlessly fascinating to him as the old one had been. She’s so funny and clever, with a true dry wit, and he can’t wait hear what she’ll say once she has a full vocabulary. He’s always known she’s not stupid; there must be a million ideas trapped inside her that she just doesn’t have the words for yet.

“What should we do?” Eleven asks.

Mike’s ideal day would entail Eleven telling him absolutely every single thing that’s happened since she went away, while holding his hand, but he doesn’t feel courageous enough to suggest such a thing yet. “Well, you’re the Queen, why don’t you decide.”

Eleven thinks for a moment, nibbling on a scrap of pie crust. “Practice words?”

Mike’s happy to do that, but he’s a little surprised she asked, and it must show on his face, because she looks sheepish, admitting “Nervous. For school.”

“You’re going to do great,” Mike tells her, with earnest enthusiasm. “You’re a really fast learner, and you’ve learned so much this year.”

This earns him a very small smile from Eleven. “I listen.”

“I have an idea,” Mike says eagerly, and Eleven gets up from the table. She’s still wearing the white nightgown, and Mike finds it more than a little distracting. He averts his eyes, adding “But we need to get dressed first.”

“Nancy left clothes for me.” Eleven’s voice is reverent whenever she mentions his sister’s name. Mike feels like a complete loser for being jealous of his own sister.

Eleven scampers from the room, thrilled for a chance to try on more hand-me-downs, but Mike catches her by the wrist before she can go.

“What’s that?” He asks, pointing to a small red stain on the collar of her nightgown.

Eleven draws back. She makes a cup with her hand and mimes drinking. “Juice. Karen’s favorite.”

“Yeah, Mom loves cranberry juice. I think it’s too sour.”

Eleven slips her wrist from his grip and, with a grin, trots into the living room and disappears up the stairs.

Mike watches her go, then crosses to the kitchen table and picks up Eleven's dirty plate and glass, and places them in the sink. The glass is indeed sticky with cranberry juice. Of course it's not really the right shade of red, but...

It's easier just to believe her.

Jonathan walks Nancy to her locker, glaring down the students who cast sneering, mocking looks in their direction. Nancy had almost completely withdrawn, socially, since last November, maintaining friendships only with a few fellow bookish girls who took the same AP classes. Jonathan privately wondered if they reminded her of Barb, but never asked. He had never exactly been an extrovert himself.

Sometimes Steve Harrington tried to intervene with bullies like Tommy H on their behalf, but it always made it worse. In the months since he and Nancy had broken up, the practice had petered out, and Jonathan is grateful. He has been fighting his own battles his whole life, and sees no reason to stop now. Besides, once you've taken down a monster, assholes like Tommy lose their edge.

Nancy stares at the ground as they walk. She seems especially subdued this morning. Jonathan hopes that it isn't because of their heart to heart last night—or at least, that it isn't because she totally caught him staring at her breasts.

He waits until they reach her locker, which stands in a relatively quiet hallway, to ask. "You okay? You're quiet today."

Nancy puts her books in her locker before turning to look at him. She bites her lip anxiously and her large eyes look huger than ever. "Do

you ever wonder if...it's not over?"

"What do you mean?" Jonathan asks. All of a sudden it feels hard to draw breath.

"I mean..." Nancy looks around, checking that there are no eavesdroppers looking to gather ammunition against the resident freaks, "The danger." She raises her eyebrows slowly and significantly. "What if it's not over? What if we're just in the eye of the storm?" Her voice is trembling now, and she clutches the strap of her book bag with both hands. "What if this is the moment of calm before all hell breaks loose?"

Jonathan would like to reassure Nancy, to tell her that she's being paranoid and unnecessarily anxious. But he thinks about Will, coughing fitfully in his sleep. And he thinks about coming home late that one night, a few months ago, to find Chief Hopper and his mother burning something in the backyard.

They wouldn't tell him what it was, but his mother had obviously been crying.

No, he can't lie to Nancy. He can't lie to his best friend. "I worry too, sometimes," he admits in a low, gravelly voice.

Nancy's tense shoulders slump with visible relief, to Jonathan's surprise. She leans heavily against her locker. "Oh thank God," she whispers, almost like a real prayer. "I'm just glad someone believes me."

Eleven, wearing flared blue jeans, a yellow t-shirt, and an olive green coat from Nancy's 1970s girlhood, rides on the back of Mike's bicycle all the way to the Hawkins Township Library. It gives him no small thrill to feel her small hands on his waist once more, even if it is a

little harder to balance the bike now that they are both bigger and no longer the same height.

Only a true idiot would go to the *library* while ditching school if he really was playing hooky. Mike figures he could tell the librarians to call his mother at the Lutheran Church bake sale if they hassled him and Eleven, but since the children are quiet, they're left to their own devices.

Confidently, Mike leads Eleven back through the tall shelves of books towards the brightly-lit, invitingly cozy children's section. El, who had taken in the whole of the library with wide and wondering eyes, explored the children's department with delight, gently running her fingers over the spines of the colorful books and carefully examining the cloth puppets and wooden trains scattered across low play tables in the center of the room. Mike patiently narrated most everything they did, pointing and objects and naming them aloud.

With Mike's help, Eleven chooses a combination of picture books and short illustrated chapter books. Mike is excited to share his own favorites with her—*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* and *Sheila the Great* by Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary's *Henry and Ribsy* and *Beezus and Ramona*, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* by Louis Sachar—but Eleven gravitates towards books with animals and other girls on the cover, like *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables*.

They fill Mike's backpack with fairytales, adventure stories, and even a few mysteries—specifically, a few of the iconic yellow-spine volumes from the *Nancy Drew* series. Eleven refuses the inclusion of *Alice in Wonderland*, deeming the cover image of Alice falling down the gaping black rabbit hole to be “scary.” When there's almost no room left, they visit the audiovisual department to choose a few more stories on cassette: *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle.

“You can borrow my Walkman and headphones to listen to the cassettes when you're alone,” Mike explains, “And we'll read the books to you until you learn to do it yourself.”

Eleven studies the cover of *The Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. “T, H, E, M, I, X, E, D,” she recites aloud, touching each

letter with her fingertip as she says it. “U-P-F-I-L-E—“

“You know the alphabet?” Mike asks, taken aback.

Letters, and patterns of letters, were some of the first things Papa had taught Eleven to listen to and memorize in his laboratory experiments. Eleven wouldn’t have had the words to explain that to Mike, even if she had wanted to—and she did not. She only nodded. She had always understood that the symbols had meaning, but had never been taught how to put more than a few simple combinations together. “P-A” twice meant “Papa,” but she has no idea how to spell her own name.

Carrying the heavy backpack between them up to the front desk, Mike and Eleven check out the books and tapes from a bemused looking librarian. It would be impossible to take all the books home with both of them on the bike, so instead Mike wears the backpack of books and Eleven walks his bike beside him as they slowly meander their way back home.

Mike continues to point out words, his voice is growing rough from the constant stream of talking. “Bike racks. Bulletin boards. Flyers.”

Eleven examines the collage of flyers pinned in slouching, faded layers over the bulletin board outside the community center. In the far left corner, under an advertisement for a pediatric cancer fundraiser, she catches sight of a black-and-white picture of a girl with short, curly hair and large glasses. *Barb*. Eleven’s stomach lurches uncomfortably and she quickly averts her eyes, her gaze falling on a crisp, new flyer printed on ice blue paper. “Hawkins Middle School SNOW BALL,” it reads, hand-drawn snowflakes surrounding the unevenly spaced bubble letters.

Eleven taps one of the snowflakes with her fingertip, drawing Mike’s attention to the flyer. “Star?”

“Snowflake,” Mike corrects her, flushing. “That’s a flyer for the Snow Ball.”

Eleven withdraws her hand. “Oh.”

“We’re—you still wanna go to that, right?” Mike’s brown eyes are large and soft beneath his long, fair eyelashes. “I mean, like... with me.”

“Can’t break a promise,” Eleven replies.

“But you want to go?” Mike asks before he can stop himself, sounding pathetic to his own ears.

“Yes.”

There’s a twinkle in her eye that makes him feel soothed and disquieted at the same time, but Mike can’t help but grin from ear to ear. “It’s a date, then,” he says, his voice a little hoarse.

“It’s a date,” Eleven repeats blankly. The words have little significance to her.

In spite of the bulky backpack, Mike could have skipped all the way home.

Notes for the Chapter:

All the books cited were published before 1984.

7. The Pistol

Notes for the Chapter:

I think you're gonna like this one, fam.

The woods is quiet, save for the sound of dry leaves crunching underfoot.

“Too dry to practice with the lighter,” Nancy notes. “We could start a forest fire.”

“Yeah.” Jonathan sets his duffle bag down, and there’s a faint clatter of metal-on-metal. “Don’t want Smoky the Bear on my ass.” He scratches the back of his neck, grimacing. “I don’t know that the fire part is something we can practice anyway.”

“Fair enough.” Nancy scans the perimeter of the clearing they’ve stopped at. “Are we deep enough in?”

“Probably. If anyone hears the gunshots, they’ll just assume it’s hunters.”

Nancy winces, thinking of the bloodied deer from last year. “I guess.”

“What time is it?”

Nancy checks her wristwatch. “Almost four o’clock.”

Jonathan kneels and unzips the duffle. “We have awhile before we need to get back.”

“Mom said you guys are having dinner with us tonight. Daddy’s still in Ohio.”

Jonathan passes Nancy the pistol and a small box of bullets. She sits cross-legged on the forest floor and starts to load the gun with the dispassionate air of a seasoned shooter. The weight of it still feels familiar in her gloved hand, even though it’s been almost a year since she took a shot.

They had decided that morning to gather up their old monster hunting supplies, which were stashed under a tarp in the Byers' shed, and return to the woods after school. The hope was that practicing the skills they had learned while fighting the demogorgon would dispel their uneasiness over another potential supernatural threat. Even if it wouldn't help, it couldn't hurt, and it was as good an excuse as any to spend a little more time alone together.

Jonathan hauls the rusty, scorched bear trap from the bag. They had cleaned it as best they could last winter, with a garden hose and some old rags and rubbing alcohol, but it was still vaguely sticky to the touch. Nancy eyed the trap with distaste. With its large metallic spikes, it looked like a Medieval torture device.

Shucking off his winter gloves, Jonathan looks over at Nancy apologetically. "I can't do it by myself."

Nancy sets the pistol aside and crawls over, kneeling across from Jonathan with the bear trap grinning its terrible sharp smile between them. She sheds her own gloves, and then together they carefully pry the trap open with the tips of their fingers. Nancy's breathing heavily as they do, caught in the grip of the memories that inspired her darkest nightmares. Jonathan can feel her breath on his face, ruffling his long, straight bangs.

One of Nancy's curls has slipped loose from her ponytail, and it clings to the corner of her mouth. When the trap is finally locked in the open position, they lean back on their heels. Jonathan reaches across the distance between them and brushes the stray curl off Nancy's face without a second thought. It only occurs to him to be embarrassed after the impulsive gesture, but Nancy doesn't seem to have even noticed. She's still eying the trap with fear and distaste. "Ok, it still works, let's close it up now," she says impatiently. "I don't want some poor little animal to get caught in it."

Jonathan pulls the lock free and eases the trap shut once more. He wipes his hands on his jeans and pulls his gloves back on. Nancy shoves her own gloves in her coat pocket and takes up the pistol once more. She checks the safety and then tucks it in the waistband of her pants. They pull a plastic grocery bag full of empty soda cans from the duffle bag and start lining them up around the clearing.

Nancy takes aim at the cans first, holding the pistol tightly with both hands. Her mouth is set in the a thin line, and she reminds Jonathan of one of the heroes from the old Western movies that Lonny likes so much. Her first shot finds its mark, sending the flimsy aluminum can flying with a soft ping of metal on metal.

“Nicely done, Nancy Wheeler.”

Nancy still looks very solemn. “Let’s not forget to give credit where credit is due. Eleven defeated the monster, not us. And frankly, shooting it didn’t do much of anything.”

“It did wound it, a bit.”

“I’m not sure,” Nancy counters, shaking her head. “Mike told me all about that night, and it seems like the monster was in fine form until she got ahold of it. The fire definitely did something, at least.” Nancy pauses for a moment, and when she speaks, her voice sounds choked. “My brother would probably dead if not for Eleven.”

“Mine too, but—oh, *Nancy!*” Jonathan sees that tears are sparkling in Nancy’s large blue eyes once more. He would pull her into a hug, but he doesn’t want to startle her while she’s holding a loaded gun. “You can’t do this again. You can’t take on this guilt that doesn’t even belong to you.”

Nancy turns away, wiping at her eye with the back of her wrist. “Shut up,” she mutters, feeling angry with herself for crying and angry with Jonathan for calling her out. “It’s not even like that.”

“How many times have you scolded me for blaming myself for Will’s disappearance?”

“Shut *up!*”

“Real mature.” Jonathan rolls his eyes, affectionate but exasperated. “You know if you keep up that logic, you could say that Will would be dead if not for Eleven, and my mom, and your mom, and—”

Nancy turns to face him again, her face white save for the bright angry flush spreading from her cheeks to her ears. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

Jonathan holds up his hands in defense. "I'm just trying to show you how ridiculous you're being."

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I not processing my *trauma* in a way that makes *sense* to you?" Now it's Nancy's turn to roll her eyes. She cocks the pistol, taking aim at another soda can. "I'll try to work through this shit more *logically* for your sake."

"That's not what I meant at all, and you know it." He takes a tentative step closer to her, but she won't look at him. "It's not your responsibility to save the world."

Nancy narrows her eyes and pulls the trigger. A second soda can goes sailing across the forest floor. "If not me, then who?"

When she turns to face him again, her blue eyes are steely and dry of tears. Nancy crosses the distance between them and places the pistol in Jonathan's hand. "Well, go on. Give it your best shot."

Jonathan takes the gun, holding it limply by his side. Nancy leans in, smirking. "What are you waiting for, Jonathan?"

Realizing he doesn't have a good answer to that question, Jonathan takes one step forward and presses his lips to Nancy's.

For a moment, she doesn't respond. Jonathan wonders if she's too shocked to pull away. But then she's leaning into him, cuddling her small body against his and deepening the kiss. Jonathan drops the pistol on the forest floor and wraps his arms around her, pulling her flush against him. Nancy is practically standing on tip-toe, she's so much shorter than him, wrapping her arms around his neck for support. Caught off guard, Jonathan stumbles. Nancy clutches him at his collar, dragging him forward a few paces as she steps backward. Her back is pressed against a tree now, and they still haven't broken the kiss. It's easier with the trunk to balance against, and Jonathan's hands slide under Nancy's unzipped coat, over the curve of her hips, the flat plane of her stomach.

Nancy arches her back against the tree, pressing her chest against Jonathan's and bending a denim-clad knee between his legs. Jonathan pulls away with a groan. "Nancy," he rasps, his voice deep

and desperate.

On his lips, her name sounds new, even to Nancy's own ears. Wanting to hear him say it again, she leans back in, pressing her lips to the hollow of his exposed neck. She's rewarded with another pained groan, but this time Jonathan actually steps away, breaking their embrace.

They pant into the silence, their hot breath visible in the cold November air. Nancy wraps her coat more tightly around her body. Her ponytail has been loosed from rubbing against the tree trunk, and the wind blows stray curls around her face. Jonathan's hands are trembling slightly. He clenches them into fists by his sides to keep from reaching for her again.

Nancy looks away first, scanning the forest floor for the gun. "Come on...let's fire off a few more rounds before dinner. You could use the practice." She finds the pistol and passes it to him again.

Jonathan cocks the gun and raises it to shoulder level, squinting and taking aim at the nearest can. He can feel Nancy looking at him, and he can't help but look over his shoulder and glance at her at the last minute. His shot misses the can by at least a foot.

"You didn't even look," Nancy chides him, trying and failing not to smile.

Jonathan shrugs, a shy grin turning the corners of his mouth up.

Nancy puts her hands in her pockets, shivering slightly as the wind picks up. "What if Thumper had been right there?"

Jonathan puts the safety on the gun and places it back in his duffle bag. "Then I guess I'd be asking Karen how she feels about making rabbit stew for dinner."

"That's not funny."

"But you're smiling."

Nancy kicks a few stray leaves in his direction. Jonathan draws close to her once more, and for a second she thinks he's going to kiss her

again. But instead he takes the bottom corners of her coat in his hands, and zips it up for her, his hand resting against her collarbone for just a moment when the zipper reaches the top.

“It’s cold out,” he explains, ignoring the warmth between them.

Jonathan picks up the duffle full of weapons, which jangles as he adjust the weight against his shoulder. Nancy is slowly pulling her gloves back on, feeling slightly dazed. She follows, a few paces behind, as he leads the way back to his car.

“We never got a chance to practice with the bat,” Nancy realizes, just before they reach the car.

Jonathan grins. “There’s always next time.”

By the time Nancy and Jonathan arrive at the Wheeler house, having been mercifully spared the task of making conversation by the loud music in Jonathan’s car, everyone else is already seated around the dining room table. Karen sits at the foot of the table, in her usual spot, with Holly in the highchair beside her. Since Ted is still out of town, Eleven sits at his place at the head of the table, quietly beaming under the warm light of the dining room chandelier.

“Nancy, Jonathan, have a seat! Your food is getting cold.” Karen gestures to the two empty chairs on either side of her. The teenagers slip into their seats across from each other, avoiding eye contact. Jonathan has Will on his other side, and Nancy is next to Mike, who’s putting on the angsty preteen performance of the century for being made to sit between his sister and Lucas instead of in Lucas’ spot at Eleven’s side. Joyce is between Eleven and Will. She’s alternating between leaning over Eleven’s plate to help cut up her steak, and

pushing food around Will's plate, trying to encourage him to eat "just a few more bites, sweetheart, if you can."

"This looks delicious, Mrs. Wheeler," Jonathan remarks earnestly. The plate of steak, roasted vegetables, and homemade bread in front of him looks like it could have been pictured in *Ladies Home Journal*.

Karen gives him a warm look. "Thank you, Jonathan." She had always liked Jonathan Byers a great deal, because he was consistently polite and well-spoken. In the year since Will's disappearance, he had only impressed her more by consistently stepping up to look after his brother.

Jonathan taps Will's elbow with his own. "How was your day?"

"Really good!" Will chirps, nibbling a piece of bread. He looks tired but happy. "I came over here right after school and Mrs. Wheeler let us rent *A New Hope* and watch it."

Lucas interjects, excited. "El had never seen *Star Wars* before! But now she has and she knows all the characters!"

Will nods while El glows with the pleasure of being included in things normal kids do. "Leia was her favorite."

Jonathan catches Eleven's eye. "Of course Leia's her favorite. Leia's the best."

"Where's Jim?" Joyce asks, apropos of nothing, looking up from El's plate.

Karen looks slightly taken aback. "He didn't tell you? He called me, last minute, to say he couldn't make it."

Joyce puts down her utensils. "Oh."

"Oh, don't worry, nothing's wrong," Karen explained, mistaking the intentions behind Joyce's worried look, "He's just very busy with work. But he was sorry he couldn't make it. He talked to Eleven on the phone for awhile so he could hear all about her day."

Joyce thinks that with Eleven's limited vocabulary, that must have been a very short conversation. "What did you and the Chief talk about?" she asks Eleven, putting on a casual air.

"Books," Eleven replies, taking a sip of milk.

"Books?"

"*Anne of Green Gables*," she elaborates.

Lucas raises his eyebrows. "Chief has read *Anne of Green Gables*?"

Eleven nodded, looking pleased. "Favorite book."

"No way," Lucas laughs. "Wait 'til Dustin hears about this!"

Thinking of Sarah, Joyce and Karen exchange a quick, sad glance down the length of the table. It's lost on the children.

From the angle she's sitting at, Nancy might have picked up on the furtive look between the mothers, had she not been so focused on running her toes over Jonathan's bare ankle under the table. He grips his fork a little tighter and she tries not to laugh.

Will looks up at his mother with big eyes. "Do you think Hop's ok?"

"I'm sure he is, sweetheart," Joyce reassures him. Will's tender concern for his friends and family never fails to instantly melt her heart. "I'll call him after dinner, when we get home."

Eleven taps Joyce on the shoulder. Her face is very serious. "After dinner. Read. You said."

"Right, of course. I promised Eleven I would read her one of her new books after dinner."

Eleven sits back in her chair, satisfied. "Sleepover?" she asks Lucas.

"Nah, sorry El." Lucas shakes his head. "Not allowed."

"Mrs. Sinclair specifically asked to have Lucas home after dinner tonight," Karen says, wiping grease off a squirming Holly's face. Mike

is idly stabbing his potatoes with his fork over and over. “Michael, please. Stop playing with your food.”

Mike drops his fork on his plate with a clatter, slouching low in his chair. Karen turns her eyes skyward, as if asking for God’s help dealing with her houseful of hormonal children.

Author's Note:

Please review. I absolutely depend on reviews, especially as this story has not been planned all the way through to the end, so reader feedback has real potential to shape my ideas and my voice as I move forward with these characters.

I should also probably note that I'm a huge Winona Ryder fan and have been basically my entire teenhood through adult life, so my portrayal of Joyce will likely always be gushingly, glowingly positive. But I really do admire Winona's performance in this series. Her vulnerability onscreen is what makes her a true star.

Thanks for reading!